

# Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/108686/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Kelsey, Darren 2018. Affective mythology and 'The Notorious' Conor McGregor: monomyth, mysticism, and mixed martial arts. *Martial Arts Studies* (5) , pp. 15-35. 10.18573/mas.47 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/mas.47>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/mas.47>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



## CONTRIBUTOR

*Darren Kelsey is Head of Media, Culture, Heritage in the School of Arts and Cultures at Newcastle University. He researches mythology and ideology in contemporary media, culture and politics. His recent monograph, Media and Affective Mythologies, synergises approaches to critical discourse studies with the work of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and other mythologists. His psycho-discursive approach explores the depths of the human psyche to analyse the affective qualities of storytelling.*

# AFFECTIVE MYTHOLOGY AND 'THE NOTORIOUS' CONOR MCGREGOR MONOMYTH, MYSTICISM AND MIXED MARTIAL ARTS DARREN KELSEY

## DOI

10.18573/mas.47

## KEYWORDS

Conor McGregor; affective mythologies;  
mixed martial arts; archetypes; consciousness.

## CITATION

Kelsey, Darren. 2017. 'Affective  
Mythology and "The Notorious"  
Conor McGregor: Monomyth,  
Mysticism and Mixed Martial Arts',  
*Martial Arts Studies* 5, 15-35.

## ABSTRACT

There are many ways in which we can interpret the sporting, commercial and personal success of Conor McGregor whose stories, fights and social appearances are analysed in this paper. There are archetypal traits of the hero and the trickster in McGregor's journey, persona, legacy, and the semiosis that surrounds him through the myth of the fighting Irish, all of which I consider as affective mythologies in their psycho-discursive forms. Prior to this analysis, I revisit the discourse-mythological approach (DMA) whilst accounting for the psycho-discursive framework I developed to analyse affective mythologies. However, I found recurring mystical qualities which called for the expansion of this analytical framework. By analysing the myth of the law of attraction, I argue that a non-reductive materialist approach to mind and consciousness is necessary due to the role of mysticism and ideology in popular culture. Since the study of martial arts requires attention to cultural, political, economic, commercial, psychological, biological and transpersonal phenomena, this paper encourages more radical interdisciplinarity between cultural studies and biological sciences to develop innovative theorisations of culture, ideology and consciousness.

'A good fight should be like a small play,  
but played seriously'  
Bruce Lee, *Enter the Dragon*

## INTRODUCTION MAYWEATHER VERSUS MCGREGOR

On 12th December 2015, Conor McGregor knocked out Jose Aldo in 13 seconds to become the undisputed UFC Featherweight Champion. Less than one year later, McGregor took the Lightweight title from Eddie Alvarez to become the first UFC fighter to hold belts in two different weight classes concurrently. McGregor has since become arguably the biggest star in the UFC. With his boxing skills being a key strength in his MMA style, he challenged Floyd Mayweather to a boxing match. Mayweather was regarded by many as the greatest boxer of all time with a record of 49-0, and he came out of retirement to accept McGregor's challenge. Given the fact that McGregor had never professionally competed as a boxer, many dismissed this as a ridiculous spectacle and a cynical cash grab. Whilst the fight did generate over \$100 million for each fighter, with Mayweather thought to have earned over \$300 million, there was far more than money at stake: The reputations of both fighters and their respective sports were on the line. The fight was attended by over 13,000 spectators and purchased as a pay-per-view event by millions of viewers worldwide – making it one of the highest grossing fights of all time. Just the pre-fight press conferences alone were attended by countless fans, including thousands of Irish fans who travelled to see McGregor. After an impressive start to the fight from McGregor, Mayweather showed his poise and his class, winning via stoppage in the 10th round. For many, McGregor had performed well and exceeded expectations. Despite losing, there was a wide level of respect for McGregor's having taken on such a challenge (when some critics had said he would be unable to land a single punch) and being competitive in the ring with Mayweather.

How had McGregor become so popular? What did he symbolise and how had his 'greatness' become so widely recognised beyond MMA and the UFC, especially in his home country of Ireland? As Joe Rogan said early on in McGregor's career:

There's some wild brash dude out of Ireland that was kicking people's asses and doing it in spectacular fashion ... He's got that thing, whatever it is. He's got talent, obviously he's got speed, excellent striking technique, excellent wrestling and jiu-jitsu, but he's also got that thing. It's hard to figure out what that thing is but you know when people have it.  
[<https://youtu.be/91liSjahuNw>]

There are many ways in which we can interpret the sporting, commercial and personal success of McGregor. There are distinct

archetypal traits of the hero and the trickster in McGregor's journey, rhetoric, embodiment, persona, cultural and personal legacies, and the semiosis that surrounds him. These elements form part of the stories he has told and the stories that have been told about him. Those stories are theorised in this paper through an analysis of affective mythology.

Prior to the analysis, I outline the theoretical and analytical position I adopt in the McGregor case study. I recap the discourse-mythological approach (DMA) whilst accounting for the psycho-discursive framework I developed to analyse affective mythologies [Kelsey 2017]. However, amongst the semiotic and archetypal material in this analysis, I found recurring mythical and mystical qualities (such as visualisation and the law of attraction), which called for the expansion of my analytical framework. Hence, I introduce non-reductive materialism as a philosophical position to understand how the psycho-discursive mechanisms of metaphor and externalisation operate through affective mythologies. By taking a non-reductive materialist approach, this paper will enhance the scope of the analytical framework I adopt in my research on affective mythologies. In conclusion, I will argue that a non-reductive materialist approach to mind and consciousness is necessary due to the manner in which forms of mysticism and ideology recurrently operate through forms of popular culture. But before I cover the analytical framework that is adopted in the case study, I will discuss visualisation and the law of attraction in relation to McGregor.

## VISUALISATION AND THE LAW OF ATTRACTION

*The Secret* [see Byrne 2006] is a film and book claiming to point to a force that exists in the universe through which visualisation and positive thinking will attract (magnetise) good fortune. This concept has influenced McGregor's personal philosophy and is often present in his rhetoric. It often operates through the persona he has constructed and the archetypal qualities of his story. The law of attraction (positive visualisation) is a metaphor that is used to enable a positive and focused mind-set. A materialist approach to mind and consciousness, which I will discuss later, means there is no external entity being attracted to an individual through positive thoughts. That said, whilst the law of attraction might be fantastical in terms of its mystical claims about the universe, the metaphorical, affective qualities for those who use this myth to focus their mind are real; it provides a mind-set for individuals to feel positively empowered and in control. Its externalised, metaphorical form is necessary in order to stimulate its internal affect. Like religious metaphor, it serves its own mythological purpose through the affective qualities that it resonates with in the psyche (a Jungian concept of the psyche that I will return to shortly). The myth of the law of attraction only becomes a fallacy when it transforms from metaphor to literalism. McGregor, for his part, often refers to the law of attraction in both metaphorical and literal terms.

In cases such as *The Secret*, as well as in the rhetoric of other motivational speakers, we see how the *literalism of metaphor* functions as a vehicle for ideology, as economic and social narratives that try to naturalise cultural conditions through dualist concepts of a greater power or entity in the universe. Through the motivational talks of Tony Robbins, for example, Robbins refers to the law of attraction as one reason why the rich get richer and the poor are poor – because the poor have not discovered the law of attraction [https://youtu.be/YISTfOo-R4I]. In *The Secret*, it is reported that a gay man who was being bullied and intimidated because of his sexuality changed his mind-set and experienced an immediate change in circumstance because of the law of attraction and positive visualisation. These are the kinds of examples that can be ideologically problematic and misleading because they have a tendency to slip towards dualist mysticism by overemphasising the control that one's mind has on external, physical factors. If positive thinking results in positive changes of demeanour, subtle adjustments of body language, subconscious interactions and interpersonal relations that resonate positively with other people, then these socio-cognitive explanations warrant attention. But literalising the law of attraction – from its metaphorical form into dualist, mystical forms – does not explain the psychological phenomenon of visualisation and positive thinking.

In the McGregor case study, I am still interested in understanding why visualisation is powerful, i.e. how it functions metaphorically and ideologically, as both a semiotic and psychological (internal/embodied) mechanism. The law of attraction myth, for some people, can be inspiring, unifying and motivational because of the mind-set it stimulates and the focus it provides. Its mystical and metaphorical elements stem from the four mythological functions identified by Joseph Campbell.<sup>1</sup> Rather than criticising McGregor for adopting the law of attraction, I am interested in how this myth resonates through his story and how other archetypal, semiotic and mythological forms support this myth to construct McGregor's greatness as a cultural phenomenon. McGregor's mysticism makes a significant contribution in the monomythical narrative of his journey. But how can we analyse McGregor's story in terms of the archetypal qualities that construct his persona? This is where I adopt the discourse-mythological approach as a psycho-discursive framework for analysing affective mythologies. I will now outline this framework propaedeutically to a more thorough examination of the McGregor mythos.

1 Campbell identified what he saw as four common functions of myth [see Campbell and Moyers 1988]: A **metaphysical** (or **mystical**) function, a **cosmological** function, a **sociological** function, and a **pedagogical** function. These functions explain the social and psychological levels through which we use myths to help make sense of the world. There is no need to interpret these functions rigidly or use them to categorise every story in my case studies. Rather, the intertextual complexities of storytelling and current affairs will often contain overlapping layers of mythological functions. These complexities show us how multiple archetypes are developed through the affective dynamics and recurring functional traits of mythology.

## DISCOURSE-MYTHOLOGICAL APPROACH (DMA)

In previous work, I designed DMA to analyse discursive constructions of myth in news stories [Kelsey 2015]. Initially, DMA was not a psycho-discursive framework. More recently, I adapted it to analyse the psycho-discursive mechanisms of other media and cultural texts [Kelsey 2017]. This section will provide an overview of the DMA framework in order to familiarise readers with its terminology and analytical grounding.

Discourse, mythology and ideology, though overlapping terms, must nevertheless be distinguished [Bottici 2007; Flood 2002]. As Flood points out, failure to define the concept of discourse within theoretical frameworks of myth have resulted in two central limitations: First, the distinction between myth and ideology has been blurred; second, a systematic approach for analysing how beliefs are expressed through myth has not been provided. By contrast, it is important to understand how myth 'arises from the intricate, highly variable relationship between claims to validity, discursive construction, ideological marking, and reception of the account by a particular audience in a particular historical context' [Flood 2002]. In distinguishing between myth and ideology, Flood defines myth as a type of discourse and a vehicle for ideology. Similarly, Bottici describes myths as narratives which 'put the drama on stage' [2007: 206].

When identifying ideological positions or expressions of discourse, however, the analyst often faces a problem, viz. the accusation of carrying or applying their own ideological perspective:

The problem is that, once one enters into the polemical use of the concept of ideology, it becomes impossible to extricate oneself from it – it triggers a vicious circle. The dichotomy of 'ideological' versus 'real' upon which this use ultimately rests can always be turned against those who employ it'. [Bottici 2007: 199]

Against this, a neutral approach to ideology [Kelsey 2014, 2015, 2017] enables comparative and critical analysis capable of addressing the content, structure, and functional elements of ideologies [Flood 2002] in different discursive and cultural contexts. Here, I do not claim any freedom from ideology or shy away from acknowledging my own subjective interpretations; the analyst can accept that their own knowledge, understanding and critique is influenced by ideology. In such an approach, the analyst is critically aware of this and is able to critically reflect: 'Analysts are not free from ideology or superior to myth. But they can be critical and they can be reflective without proposing truth or falsity in their own accounts when we understand how myth and ideology function through the discourses we produce and consume' [Kelsey 2014]. I do not take the negative approach to ideology [Fuchs 2015] that suggests ideology only exists in those things



that we are critical of and, hence, our own critique cannot be equally ideological. Nor do I take a pseudo-objective, pseudo-scientific or Marxist approach. My position here has refuted the claim that we can operate outside of ideology through non-ideological objectivism [see Baines and Kelsey 2013, 2015a]. Ideology is not inevitably negative either. Rather, in taking this approach, I see culture as a battleground of ideologies that play out in a struggle to construct different meanings.<sup>2</sup> This approach to discourse, mythology and ideology is concerned with how meanings function and the purpose that they serve rather than proposing fixed ideals of truth versus lies or non-ideological versus ideological. It is here that the DMA diagram [Kelsey 2015a] demonstrates its synergy of discourse, mythology and ideology.

As we can see, this diagram (Figure 1) only accounts for the circular mechanisms of ideologies and mythologies operating through discourses, which are also products of ideologies and mythologies. At this stage, it does not account for the deeper psychological groundings that account for the affective stimuli where archetypes [Jung 1946, 1959, 1973] operate across the transpersonal terrains of affective apparatus and the collective unconscious.

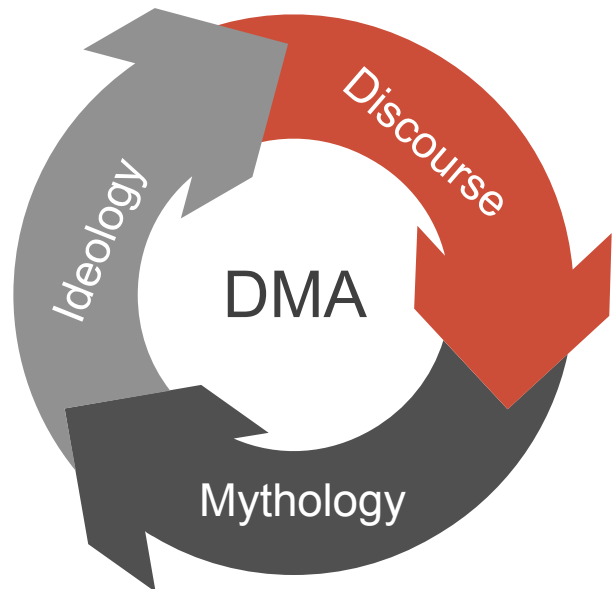


Figure 1: Discourse-mythological approach (DMA) [Kelsey 2015]

## AFFECTIVE APPARATUS AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

When I initially developed DMA, it was never proposed as a complete model or fixed approach. DMA was developed as a dynamic framework that could always be refined and that was open to new synergies and further theoretical expansion.<sup>3</sup> Hence, I proposed *affective apparatus* [Kelsey 2017] as the most substantive term for encompassing the psycho-discursive dimensions, language formations and social

<sup>2</sup> Fuchs argues that: 'Critical theory is a critique of ideology: Ideologies are practices and modes of thought that present aspects of human existence that are historical and changeable as eternal and unchangeable. Ideology critique wants to remind that everything that exists in society is created by humans in social relationships and that social relationships can be changed' [2015: 7]. On this basis, he argues that: 'Critical theory has a normative dimension: For Marx, critical theory is a normative realism. It argues that it is possible to logically provide reasonably grounded arguments about what a good society is, that the good society relates to conditions that all humans require to survive (the essence of humans and society), and that one can judge existing societies according to the extent that they provide humane conditions or not' [7]. However, a more moderate (or neutral) approach to ideology argues that all ideas created by humans carry certain ideological forms, rather than those that Marxism has decided are wrong. Critical attention can be paid to the problems that some ideologies cause (or are products of) but analysts do not claim to be free from ideology – they are part of a struggle of ideas within culture.

<sup>3</sup> Kelsey [2017] introduced the concept of affective practice to DMA by adopting a refined approach to that of Wetherell, who showed that discourse studies could incorporate affect theory from a social science perspective. However, Kelsey adopted this concept in synthesis with psychoanalysis, which differs to Wetherell.

expressions of mythology. This stems from the neuropsychic depths of the unconscious and personal psyche to the collective actions and expressions of social groups, i.e. the transpersonal. These groups experience and express their own mythologies in cultural environments with distinct ideological implications. This approach enriches the scope of DMA and provides us with a psycho-discursive synergy that DMA and other discursive frameworks previously lacked. As Cassirer [1946: 43] states, mythology, more than basic emotion, is the *expression* of emotion: 'The expression of the feeling is not the feeling itself – it is emotion turned into an image'. This is one example of why we should focus on this oscillation between non-representation and representation if we are to study mythology in its affective form. Jung's model of the psyche and collective unconscious is adopted here with this purpose in mind.

Jung's work helps us to think about the neuropsychic and evolutionary aspects of affective qualities behind cultural mythologies. Jung's work provides a useful starting point when we begin to think about the depth and significance of affective qualities that operate in our unconscious minds. Jung proposed the concept of a collective unconscious, a set of shared psychic structures within all human minds that are fundamental to all psychological development:

My thesis, then, is as follows: In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.  
[Jung 1996: 43]

Before going any further, it is important to confront some common misconceptions of Jung's work. Jung did not overlook the significance of culture and personal experience in the development of one's own psychology, characteristics and personality. He recognised the importance of culture in personal and collective contexts that were significant to individual and group psyches. But deep beneath one's personal unconscious (shaped by their own experiences and significantly influenced by the society in which they live) Jung proposed a *shared psychic structure* that is universal across all individuals. Jung conceived archetypes to be 'innate neuropsychic centres processing the capacity to initiate, control and mediate the common behavioural characteristics and typical experiences of all human beings' [Stevens 1994: 49].

Archetypes are developed from neurological stimuli, recurring psycho-discursive complexes and behavioural patterns that we all share. They take on powerful forms in how we tell stories to construct meaning. From the collective unconscious through to the social and cultural salience of consciousness, we can analyse the affective trajectory of archetypes as they become personally and collectively fused within popular narratives and stories of our times. Jung's model of the psyche encourages us to think beyond the parameters of textual, discursive and social practices of language, semiotics and communication. Jung's model encompasses those conscious, physical qualities whilst delving deeper into the psyche to account for psychological stimulants and components of communication that we do not consciously draw on when we think and interact. These aspects are significant since they form those archetypes and psychological complexes that make meanings powerful and salient in their conscious and cultural forms.<sup>4</sup> I will now introduce those archetypal conventions that are most significant to the study of the McGregor mythos. I begin by discussing the monomyth [Campbell 1949, 1988, 1990] before a more specific discussion of the trickster archetype [Kelsey 2014a; Campbell 1988; Hynes and Doty 1993].

## MONOMYTH: THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Through the influence of Jung, Campbell [1949] examined the historical and cultural traits of hero figures that occurred through ancient mythology and continue to feature in contemporary society. Of course, the specific qualities of a hero will be defined by the social group in which they exist and the moral codes they reflect – hence Campbell's work examined, as he called it, 'the hero with a thousand faces'. But there was a cyclical pattern to these stories that stimulated the formation of these characters and the journeys they pursued: 'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man' [ibid: 23]. Through these stories, Campbell showed how the hero, upon

4 Jung's collective unconscious thesis was often subjected to accusations of adopting Lamarckian biology, which proposed that ideas and images could be genetically passed directly from one generation to the next. But this criticism was inaccurate and, again, might be explained by the impenetrable style of much of Jung's work at the time. As Stevens points out, Jung did make explicit efforts to differentiate his position from that of Lamarck: 'It is the predisposition to have certain experiences that is archetypal and inherited, not the experience itself' [1994: 54]. Rather than dismissing Jung's archetypal hypothesis for a lack of scientific rigour, Stevens argues quite the opposite, claiming that 'the collective unconscious is a respectable scientific hypothesis and one does not have to adopt a Lamarckian view of biology to entertain it' [54].

hearing the "call to adventure," would take it upon himself to answer the call and set out on a heroic journey – a narrative pattern that, as we see in the analysis, resonates throughout McGregor's own 'heroic journey'.

As was the case with Jung, it was this recurring narrative and behavioural pattern that interested Campbell, especially in the way that it informed the construction of a familiar and recognisable story from so many different times and cultures. The hero's journey is one of the most familiar narratives of mythology that we see commonly played out in fictional and non-fictional stories. It is a moral form of storytelling that we often use to reflect upon our own life challenges, experiences and journeys. Equally, it is important to remember that the ideological interpretations of one reader might feature an archetype that is used to make sense of a story, whilst a different reader might apply an entirely different reading.<sup>5</sup> As Campbell showed, hero figures do not carry a monolithic form or set of characteristics and values. Heroes are dramatized and personified to reflect the core values and ideals of the societies in which their stories feature. As we see in the case study, McGregor's journey resonates with Irish fans in a very specific cultural context, whilst there are other social, semiotic and psychological phenomena that construct 'McGregor's greatness' in other cultural contexts.

The multiple forms that heroes take indicates that they could be 'warriors or pacifists, leaders or rebels, saints or sinners, rocket scientists, rock musicians, or sports stars' [83]. The form that a hero takes is largely dependent on context; a hero's role is dependent 'on the world he is born into' [Carlyle 1908: 312]. Lule adopted Campbell's work through his own analysis of journalistic storytelling:

**The Hero myth, like many archetypal stories, often takes on similar forms from age to age. The Hero is born into humble circumstance. The Hero initiates a quest or journey. The Hero faces battles or trials and wins a decisive victory. The Hero returns triumphant. The pattern, in more or less detail, can be found throughout mythology.**  
[2001: 82]

But, as Boorstin points out, 'we have become self-conscious about our admiration for human greatness' [1979: 51]. This has had a significant

impact on the role of heroism in modern storytelling. Boorstin argued that we create pseudo-heroic characters through celebrities that serve a temporary interest and reflect values in certain contexts before later being discarded. Scholars have recognised modern heroes as disposable characters that serve a particular purpose at one moment in time [Lule 2001; Boorstin 1979]. In other words, it is not always the individual that we believe in but rather the values that they represent. Lule's [2001] point that we see through and past the classical hero myth due to its cultural familiarity is important. In contemporary storytelling, we often need the faults and follies of hero figures to make them believable or more realistic than disposable celebrities.

As we see, McGregor differentiates himself from the other fighters through his theatrics, dress sense, uniqueness, audacious ambitions and 'mystic' predictions. For McGregor, these characteristics function within other conventions of the monomyth: the hero pursues a journey as humble hero on both a personal adventure and a greater moral quest. But he is not perfect. He makes mistakes. He is not always triumphant in every fight. But his trials and tribulations operate through those monomythical qualities that play into the image that he personifies and in which his fans believe.

## MYTHICAL TRICKSTER FIGURES

Tricksters have appeared in many forms from different cultures and mythologies over time. Often as anthropomorphic characters in fairy tales and classical myths they appear as animals such as the fox, the rabbit, the raven, the bear, or the coyote. There are endless examples of trickster tales that resonate through the parallels they reflect with the political and social affairs of modern societies and cultures. Campbell defined the trickster figure through a range of characteristics:

**Almost all non-literate mythology has a trickster-hero of some kind. ... And there's a very special property in the trickster: he always breaks in, just as the unconscious does, to trip up the rational situation. He's both a fool and someone who's beyond the system. And the trickster represents all those possibilities of life that your mind hasn't decided it wants to deal with. The mind structures a lifestyle, and the fool or trickster represents another whole range of possibilities. He doesn't respect the values that you've set up for yourself, and smashes them ... The fool is the breakthrough of the absolute into the field of controlled social orders.**  
[1993: 2]

5 O'Donnell [2003] provides a detailed account of 'interpretive communities' in his analysis of myths in journalism: 'This notion of interpretive community ... allows for a model in which myth is a dynamic force embedded within other cultural and social forces rather than a static model that sees myth as a static, individually crafted, text-based object'. It is important to understand that interpretive community theory [see Kelsey 2014] accounts for the different ways in which texts are read, consumed and understood according to the conceptual maps (and cultural knowledge) of audiences.

Due to these characteristics, Abrahams describes the trickster as 'the most paradoxical of all characters in Western narratives – at least as far as the Western mind is concerned – for he combines the attributes of many other types that we tend to distinguish clearly' [17]. He claims that the trickster can fulfil a variety of roles at various moments in time: 'clown, fool, jokester, initiate, culture hero, even ogre... He is the central character for what we usually consider many different types of hero narratives' [17]. More specifically, Radin focuses on darker and more destructive aspects to this figure:

**Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself... He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.**  
[Radin 1956: xxiii]

According to Lule, the trickster is 'one of the most fascinating and complex mythological figures, found in hundreds of societies' [2002: 24] and more than just a sly, cunning, or devious figure. Tricksters contain traits that complicate their appearance. The trickster is often portrayed as a 'crude and stupid figure, half animal [and] half human' [24]. Lule addresses these traits in news stories:

**News too often tells stories of crude, contemptible people, governed by seemingly animal instincts, who bring ridicule and destruction on themselves. In some stories, stupid criminals, dumb and dangerous athletes, hapless hit men, classless and crude rich people are offered up in the news as objects for mockery and contempt. [24]**

Hyde [1998] and O'Donnell [2003] have both explored the paradoxical mechanisms that trickster stories often reflect in various contexts. Hyde argues that tricksters are complex and often ambiguous in their contradictory characteristics as 'the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox' [1998: 7]. Hyde further claims that 'trickster stories are radically anti-idealist; they are made in and for a world of imperfections... In fact, it may be exactly because these stories do not wish away or deny what seems low, dirty and imperfect that their hero otherwise enjoys such playful freedom' [ibid:91]. Therefore, tricksters are figures who can, by nature, cross boundaries or create shifts in perceptions of their characteristics. As Street has suggested through analyses of trickster tales: 'To question everything in society would lead to anarchy; to preserve everything would lead to stagnation; the conflict is presented, and the balance achieved, in the trickster tales which so many societies possess' [1972: 19]. As Frentz adds: 'As an unconscious complex, Jung writes, the trickster can erupt in savage, animalistic, and often self-

destructive behaviours, but if assimilated into conscious awareness and nurtured through humour it can become creative, spiritual and life-affirming' [Frentz 2008: 61].

Even in instances when a trickster appears to be foolish or self-destructive, they reflect something about the societal circumstances in which they are situated. They make us reflect and stimulate change. Tricksters break down barriers in different ways that we do not expect to see – some might challenge authority whilst others might challenge our own expectations. We see these qualities in the McGregor mythos. Tricksters are often amoral and, in the case of McGregor, I am less concerned by his role as 'good' or 'bad' trickster. I am more interested in the paradoxical tensions and conflictual characteristics he embodies and which produces such a divisive character. As Jung said: 'The shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases' [2001: 62].

## A PSYCHO-DISCURSIVE FRAMEWORK

It is important to understand that this case study does not psychoanalyse McGregor. We do not know the private McGregor. What we can analyse are the things he does and says through the cultural and affective qualities of his persona. The persona is an important Jungian term since the persona is a concept that Jung proposed as 'a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual' [1992: 192]. This is not to suggest dishonesty, and Jung's point should not be reduced to the mask as mythical untruth. Jung understood the development of an appropriate persona as an important way of adapting to different social roles and circumstances. As a fighter, McGregor has said: 'At the end of the day, you gotta feel some way. So why not feel unbeatable? Why not feel untouchable? Why not feel like the best to ever do it?' [<https://youtu.be/AzhEx-ChQdY>] Through McGregor's self-actualising qualities, he has consciously crafted a unique persona through visualisation: 'All that really matters is how you see yourself. If you see yourself as the king, with all the belts and everything, no matter what no one else says, as long as you see that and really believe it, then that's what's going to happen' [<https://youtu.be/e3jwYznqv0>]. As Jacoby states: 'A strong ego relates to the outside world through a flexible persona; identifications with a specific persona (doctor, scholar, artist, etc.) inhibit psychological development' [1984: 118]. We see this flexibility in the analysis where different personas operate in different circumstances – McGregor focuses on his thoughts and situation as a family man and an Irishman as much as a fighter. The convincing and charismatic identifications that McGregor takes up all contribute to a polygonal construction of 'greatness' that is hard to define.



What I try to do in the case study is make sense of his journey – the McGregor myth – through the psycho-discursive, affective and communicative mechanisms of storytelling. In doing so, this article enhances the psycho-discursive scope of affective mythologies by laying down a philosophical position on mind and consciousness that is applicable to biological sciences [Haule 2011; Williams 2012; Wilson 1998; Dennett 2017]. This brings me to the point where I revise the work of Jung in relation to modern science through a materialist approach to culture, mind and consciousness.

## CULTURE, MIND AND MATERIALISM

Before I continue with the analysis, it is important to discuss concepts of consciousness to enhance the framework covered so far. I understand I have covered a significant volume of theoretical material already, but this section is necessary since the ground covered here enables DMA as a psycho-discursive approach to expand and encourage more radical interdisciplinary developments in cultural studies. My aim here is not to undermine current research in the arts, humanities and social sciences – rather I take this opportunity to make a positive and progressive case for radical interdisciplinary expansions of theoretical thinking that might, I believe, empower cultural studies to make new innovations in addition to its current strengths and innovations as a field.

There are many debates on mind and consciousness that stretch well beyond the scope of this paper. Even within materialist philosophies of mind there are multiple ontological perspectives. The psycho-discursive approach of affective mythologies as a theoretical framework has the capacity to mature its cognitive, neurological, biological and philosophical scope. My aim for now is to establish a (non-reductive) materialist position on mind and consciousness. This analysis should start to provide the basis for more conversations between the disciplines introduced here. Whilst my approach to affective mythologies has already developed a psycho-discursive dimension, there is more progress to be made by collaborating with scientific disciplines that provide a post-Jungian framework with a stronger interdisciplinary synthesis between the social and biological sciences.

As Haule points out [2011: 1], within psychoanalysis Jung is often dismissed as a mystic who abandoned science to pursue his 'dubious superstitions'. However, despite those aspects of Jung's work, Haule points to recent developments in evolutionary psychology that give Jungians reasons for optimism. He credits Jung's efforts to unify biological and human sciences in ways that were disciplinarily impossible at the time yet which, in hindsight, he actually managed to with relative consilience. As others have pointed out, it is interesting

that Jung's theory of the collective unconscious holds similarities with modern scientific disciplines that have developed more recently, such as ethology and sociobiology [Stevens 1994]. Zweig and Abrams explain how anthropologists and sociobiologists have argued that 'human evil is a result of curbing our animal aggression, of choosing culture over nature and losing contact with our primitive wildness' [Zweig and Abrams 1991: xxi]. Zweig and Abrams also refer to physician-anthropologist Melvin Konner who 'tells the story in *The Tangled Wing* of going to a zoo and seeing a sign that reads 'The Most Dangerous Man on Earth', only to discover that he is looking in the mirror' [xxi]. The interdisciplinary connections in Jung's work across contemporary fields of science and anthropology are impressive considering the time when he was developing these ideas.<sup>6</sup>

For these reasons, Haule [2010: 1] tells the 'story of the remarkable consilience between Jung's archetypal psychology and a biology founded on Darwinian principles and augmented by the science of genetics – what biologists call the modern synthesis'. Haule sees archetypes as inherited behavioural patterns: 'No one doubts that animals inherit behavioural patterns; and with the advance of evolutionary science in the last few decades, very few any longer doubt that humans do' [2011: 10]. Whilst Jung provided various descriptions of archetypes, 'a strong trend of his views has turned out to be amply supported by the structure of brain-and-psyche as modern science understands them' [10]. On the one hand, Haule does overstate universal agreement on the inherited behaviours in animals here – many scholars hold grave reservations over the current validity and potential accomplishments of modern science in this respect. But it is an intriguing premise and one that Jungian perspectives in cultural studies should draw on.

It is crucial to clarify that Jung did not propose the concept of archetypes as inherited ideas. Rather, he argued that an archetype was an inherited mode of functioning that corresponded 'to the inborn way in which the chick emerges from the egg, the bird builds its nest, a certain kind of wasp stings the motor ganglion of the caterpillar,

6 It is also worth noting that there have been fascinating debates in neuroscience around the evolution of the brain and subsequent dynamics of consciousness [see Wetherell 2012: 44]. On the one hand, some argue that biological and cultural developments of the brain 'did not replace these fundamental circuits of emotional readiness and experience, they augmented them' [Oatley, et al. 2006: 146]. Oatley et al argued that language, for example, has enhanced our emotional functionality but we still express traits of our primitive selves that are not open to biological or cultural modification [146]. On the other hand, some have argued [Rose 1997, 2005] that rather than augmenting those fundamental circuits of emotions and primitive traits, the evolution of consciousness and influence of culture has re-shaped and transformed potential emotional responses according to our human circumstances [Wetherell 2012: 44].

and eels find their way to the Bermudas. In other words, it is a pattern of behaviour' [Jung in Stevens 2016: 85]. Hence, I argue that it is misleading and reductionist to engage in a nurture versus nature debate here. Neither is it necessary to challenge or undermine the social constructionist approaches that are common in the social sciences, semiotics or discourse studies. This is far more complex than a simple nurture-nature debate, and cultural studies (more specifically, martial arts studies) should avoid slipping towards an inherent scepticism towards science. Science does not have to be seen as an inevitable threat to our common conceptual paradigms in cultural studies. Quite the opposite.

David Williams points out that in the process of Jung struggling to link his description of archetypes to science 'he ended up dabbling in every kind of pseudo-science and mystical explanation to account for archetypes' [2012: 8]. Hence, Williams argues, 'Jung's insight to the existence of archetypes is still relevant: the causes were just wrong' [11]. He goes on to show how myth scholars such as Campbell and Frye provide valid insights but either flirt with mysticism or fail in their efforts to be scientific. Interestingly, Williams returns to structuralism, in the work of Levi-Strauss, to argue that principles of universality – such as the archetypes – in shared theoretical paradigms between academic disciplines of mind and culture could benefit from a structuralist grounding in a Darwinian approach. He quotes biologist E.O. Wilson, who says, 'the structuralist approach is potentially consistent with the picture of mind and culture emerging from natural sciences and biological anthropology' [11]. Without meaning to casually cause a stir in cultural studies, there are some significant discussions to be had in this respect. Whilst the nuances of post-structuralism and post-modernism have made valid contributions, it might be that our current paradigms prohibit us through a lack of necessary flexibility that could account for both cultural complexity and biological tendencies and potentials of the mind. As Yuval Harari [2014a], from a polygonal perspective of historical and scientific perspectives, puts it:

**The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the mysterious glue that enables millions of humans to cooperate effectively. This mysterious glue is made of stories, not genes. We cooperate effectively with strangers because we believe in things like gods, nations, money and human rights. Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money and no human rights – except in the common imagination of human beings. You can never convince a chimpanzee to give you a banana by promising him that after he dies he will get limitless bananas in chimpanzee Heaven. Only Sapiens can believe such stories.**  
[2014b]

I am not suggesting a naïve move towards dogmatic structuralism in cultural studies. But to continue analysing the complexities of culture through a grounding that enables us to understand more about the psychology and biology behind culture can only be progressive. Returning to Williams [2012], he makes a strong case for the humanities to engage more with biology and psychology through the paradigm of neuroscience, evolution and narrative in his analysis of trickster mythology – or, as he calls it, the 'trickster brain'. This is a valid vision and it warrants attention since it can strengthen the contribution of cultural studies.

Either way, for cultural studies a strong focus must remain on ideology; a point which Williams himself goes on to acknowledge. Understanding more about the what, why and how of human nature and culture does not seek to excuse or condone destructive ideologies or what Jung referred to as the shadows of humankind.<sup>7</sup> It is the contact between mind and culture where ideology operates. Cultural studies is well-equipped to continue its work in this respect, but as Williams points out, there is the potential to enhance its analytical scope and claims. I argue that stories must still be analysed from the perspective of what they say, how they are told, how they can be read, and what purpose they serve. As philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett states: 'Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us' [1991: 418]. Non-reductive materialism enhances the philosophical clarity of affective mythologies as a theoretical framework and the directional developments it is making towards more radical interdisciplinarity. Not only does this position provide sound opposition to dualism but it sees consciousness as being intrinsic to natural processes, evolution and universal qualities in the human psyche. In other words, like our brains, our stories are part of who we are and how we have evolved.

The main reasons for establishing this position are threefold. Firstly, to move beyond any perceived endorsement of Jung's mysticism

7 According to Jung, we repress certain personality traits because we learn that they are undesirable traits that are unwelcome in our personal, domestic, social and collective lives: 'Because it is contrary to our chosen conscious attitude, the shadow personality is denied expression in life and coalesces into a relatively separate splinter personality in the unconscious, where it is isolated from exposure and discovery' [Zweig and Abrams 1991: 12]. In other words, the shadow is the 'part of the personality which has been repressed for the sake of the ego ideal' [Whitmont 1991: 12]. Jung argued that unless we learn more about our own shadows, we will continue to project them on to others, because what we see and dislike in the world is often a reflection of our shadow traits. Jung saw those things which irritate us about other people as traits that we can identify in ourselves. But often, instead of recognising our own human failings and negative (repressed) qualities, he said we tend to project them on to others by criticising their actions, personalities or beliefs.

whilst demonstrating Jung's applicability in contemporary academic interdisciplinary research across the humanities and biological sciences. Secondly, to explicitly oppose dualist philosophies of mind and consciousness, which, from a materialist position, enhances the critical scope of DMA's analytical approach to affective mythologies and ideology. Thirdly, taking this interdisciplinary position into the case study shows how this approach to affective mythologies – from a revised Jungian perspective – enhances our understanding of the what, how and why behind stories and popular culture. A recurring theme in the McGregor case study is visualisation (the law of attraction), which demonstrates why this materialist approach to consciousness is necessary. The myth of the law of attraction binds various mythological conventions together through multiple thematic and archetypal qualities of McGregor's journey.

## CASE STUDY CONOR MCGREGOR, VISUALISATION AND THE HERO'S JOURNEY

As Bowman [2017: 5] points out, Barthes suggested that we move in and out of belief systems through the entertainment of cultural spectacles. Rather than being duped and brainwashed by ideology through culture, we can be lured in and enjoy the spectacle without committing to an ideological system that a text might endorse. However, from the Jungian perspective adopted in this analysis, it might even be the case that rather than being lured in, we actively seek out spectacles of fighting because of the archetypal forms that resonate through it.

In this case study, I argue that the essence of the story is what audiences find alluring beyond the material glamour, lifestyle and public image of McGregor. I will analyse some of the archetypal conventions that contribute to McGregor's persona, which include: monomyth and the journey of the humble hero; mythical trickster figures; and the myth of the fighting Irish. Whilst the analysis is divided into three thematic sections, these themes inevitably overlap throughout.

The analysis examines multimodal texts from online videos, short films, news articles, books and podcasts that provide examples of the cultural and psychological phenomena that I theorise herein. They provide a rich and varied account of qualitative data but are by no means intended to provide a quantitative or representative sample of any particular discourse or representation. Through a vast selection of texts that I have collected, the case study provides a rigorous analysis of discursive, semiotic and psychological phenomena – it oscillates between theorisations of representational and non-representational forms.

## 'FROM NOTHING TO SOMETHING TO EVERYTHING' MCGREGOR AS HUMBLE HERO

This opening section will show how McGregor's journey reflects the archetypal traits of Campbell's monomyth. This is not to simply highlight a familiar narrative: it should reflect the essence of this myth, which operates as a vehicle for communicating characteristic qualities and cultural and domestic values. Because of the flamboyance and bravado in many of McGregor's social appearances, he is often accused of being arrogant and disrespectful. However, there are other instances when McGregor tells his story through attention to humble qualities that reflect other moral values. As McGregor said to Ariel Helwani, he is 'ruthless' in the UFC but he is humble in his gratitude towards family and friends [<https://youtu.be/1eVJMJB0Wkk>]. As I show throughout this analysis, McGregor's persona reflects an intriguing tension in the way that he oscillates between these contradictory characteristics.

McGregor's coach, John Kavanagh, has written a book called *Win or Learn* [2016].<sup>8</sup> Kavanagh recounts the time early on in McGregor's career when he suffered his first defeat. McGregor was devastated and did not return to the gym after the fight. McGregor's mother eventually called Kavanagh and asked him to come around and speak to him because she was concerned about the direction his life was heading. Despite owing him money for the previous fight fee (which McGregor had spent), Kavanagh put faith in McGregor and gave him another chance. From this moment on, McGregor's career begins to build and the story becomes one of hard work, focus and success. Even at this early stage, Kavanagh's account is compelling. It is compelling because it reflects an essential dynamic of storytelling and those transpersonal, archetypal qualities with which we are collectively familiar.

Filmmaker Guy Ritchie sees the journey of 'mastering your own kingdom' (discovering your true self and full potential) as the essential narrative dynamic of all storytelling. He uses the parable of the Prodigal Son as an example of the need to lose yourself in order to find yourself by pursuing a journey that will eventually transform you. When reading Kavanagh's book with the knowledge of where McGregor's journey has taken him and what he has become, this archetypal convention provides a significant building block in the McGregor mythos. Even in Kavanagh's case, there is a reason why he would have felt compelled to write the book in this way and provide accounts of particular moments – like the one at McGregor's house, where he supported McGregor emotionally, helped him reflect and learn from his experience, before McGregor began his journey of transformation. This

8 The latter is a slogan that Kavanagh's gym and team endorse for a positive mind-set. Whenever a fighter in their team is defeated they identify what they have learnt from the fight and use it to their benefit in future training.

is more than a story. These are the real, affective and lived experiences of mythology through its archetypal conventions in our lives, which we use to understand each other and guide our own journeys. Affective mythologies speak to a truth inside of us, a truth that we are consciously and unconsciously responsive to because it resonates with the universal structures of the human psyche – the shared, evolved, neurological structures of our brains.

The pursuit of greatness and the work that goes into training is something that McGregor and Kavanagh have talked about. A popular quote of McGregor's says: 'There's no talent here, this is hard work. This is an obsession. Talent does not exist, we are all equal as human beings. You could be anyone if you put in the time. You will reach the top, and that is that. I am not talented, I am obsessed'.<sup>9</sup> Before the Aldo fight, echoing similar words to Bruce Lee, McGregor said: 'There is no opponent. There is no Jose Aldo. Who the fuck is Jose Aldo? There's no no-one. You're against yourself. In an interview with Ariel Helwani in 2014, McGregor also said: 'Excellence is not a skill. Excellence is an attitude' [<https://youtu.be/e3jwYzxnqv0>]. These are significant monomythical conventions. Without the dedication to a cause that is pursued from an equal beginning to all other humans, the salience of the monomyth is compromised. If the essence of all storytelling is the journey of discovering one's true self, then this pursuit of greatness through excellence as an attitude (not a skill) and obsession (not talent) tells a powerful story.

This is not to suggest that we all believe in the same stories in the same way – culture and ideology are more complex than this. Multiple audiences might be indifferent to and completely unaffected by McGregor's story. Equally, others find themselves riled and irritated by the hype and confidence of McGregor. But it is the essence of the story (the journey), especially for those who believe in it, which resonates. Through the qualities that we see in McGregor's journey and his personal philosophy, which I explore below, a Jungian process of

individuation<sup>10</sup> is evident through those monomythical qualities. The monomyth can be played out in many ways, but the story McGregor chooses to tell is significant to the moral journey he is seen to pursue.

In the build up to the Mayweather fight, McGregor was interviewed by Ariel Helwani [<https://youtu.be/1eVJMJB0Wkk>]. There are some significant comments throughout the interview where McGregor reflects on his journey. Sitting on the edge of a boxing ring with the *McGregor Sports and Entertainment* logo in the middle, McGregor responds to Helwani's opening observation of the ring and logo:

Every day I get in that ring and stare at it. It's some logo, isn't it? With the big lion's head and the crown and McGregor Sports and Entertainment next to the UFC. ... It's been some journey, an absolutely amazing journey, and I am very proud of myself and very proud of everyone that's been with me. ... The distance we have come in such a short space of time through such hard work. I'm very happy.

Helwani states the symbolic significance of *McGregor Sports and Entertainment* given the fact that just over two years earlier McGregor had been talking about this project and said he would be in this partnership. As Helwani points out, it sounded crazy at the time. In agreement, McGregor responds: 'How many times have I said I am going to go and do something and I do it? It wouldn't be the first time and certainly won't be the last'.

In the same interview, McGregor responds to other questions that relate to the monomythical qualities of his journey. He explains how he pays homage to his past but without letting it define him in the present – similar to those traits of Jungian individuation and the complexes we develop through archetypal dynamics in our psyche. For example, Helwani asks McGregor about the boat he owns, which is called 188, and how it shows he does not want to forget where he came from. McGregor responds:

9 In a motivational sporting context, this quote was used by basketball star James LeBron. A Fox Sports article by Teddy Mitrosilis said: 'LeBron James will be remembered as one of the best basketball players ever and perhaps the greatest athlete overall in his generation. Given that, he undoubtedly serves as an inspiration to a ton of people. But even the all-time great athletes need sources of inspiration, too, so who do they turn to when in need of motivation? Other all-time greats, of course. For LeBron, that guy right now appears to be UFC star Conor McGregor. LeBron posted this awesome McGregor quote to Instagram on Wednesday...' [Mitrosilis 2016].

10 Individuation is sometimes referred to as self-realisation or self-actualisation [Stevens 1994]. This explains the integration between the personal and collective unconscious and the conscious self – enabling, for example, a more integrated understanding of one's own shadow complex; critiquing their less admirable qualities and challenging their ideological biases and prejudices in order to live a more fulfilled life by changing how those affective qualities of the shadow previously shaped their own behaviours and attitudes. Zweig and Adramis adopt the following definition here: 'Individuation – the process of a person becoming whole and unique – aims at embracing the light and dark simultaneously to create a constructive relationship between the ego and the self (our personal symbol of individual wholeness)' [1991: 240]. So it is firstly important to understand that by confronting the personal shadow we can manage those less desirable human traits that affect our behaviour and personality.



188 is what I used to collect on the social welfare, so I called it the 188. ... Never forget where you come from, ever! Always pay homage to it. ... Never stare because then you end up there or you end up back there, but just pay respect and be grateful for where you came from, always. ... I show up every day and work as if I am not in the position I am in, as if I am not me, and it's working.

McGregor explains how he had his fun on his boat for a day and passed it on to his dad as a gift. Whilst much of McGregor's rhetoric reflects self-actualising qualities and visualising achievements through material wealth, we can see that this is not necessarily individualistic narcissism in a materialistic, gluttonous or selfish sense. Some critics might see it in this way, as nothing more than a materialistic, monetised driven commercial narrative. But I argue that McGregor's love of money and wealth is only one aspect to the story. The cultural spectacle around McGregor's journey shows how we can tell and understand the essence of stories within those sporting and commercial systems – they operate more deeply, yet not in isolation from, the macro ideological societies of which they are a part. In other words, archetypal conventions emerge from our collective unconscious regardless of (albeit shaped and influenced by) the cultural and economic system in which they operate.

McGregor directs some attention to this in his role as a father and the fact that his son will be born into financial security. Continuing with the Helwani interview, this was a case where audiences saw a different side of McGregor compared to the bravado and hyperbole of pre-fight press conferences and weigh-ins. The personal complex McGregor reflects in his experience of fatherhood is one that fits positively into his journey – one of *legacy*, which then operates as a vehicle for moral values and principles through his teaching as a father:

Helwani: To become a father before arguably the greatest sporting event of our lifetime ... You can now tell your son that he was a part of this. Have you thought about that?

McGregor: Of course! Of course! I look forward to the day when I can show him. Show him this, show him my career, the crazy things I've done in my life, the crazy journey I've been on, and then I can mostly show him what hard work can achieve. I'll show him that if you can work hard then you can achieve great things. He's coming into a life of financial freedom. His financial freedom is secure. I don't want him to have a privileged mind-set. I want to implement what it took to get this life, and really instil hard work and focus and dedication

into his mind-set so that he goes and achieves his own greatness. That's something that's in my thoughts, always.<sup>11</sup>

The cultural politics of privilege, class and wealth are sensitive social issues. McGregor reflects on his journey with caution here. On the one hand, he celebrates his achievements and the security they provide for his son, but, on the other hand, he does not want his financial wealth to compromise the essence of his son's life journey in the pursuit of his own goals (to achieve his own greatness). What I am interested in here is the circular motion of mythology that operates through McGregor's reflection on his own journey, which in turn informs his choice to teach his son a particular set of moral values based on the necessity to pursue greatness. For McGregor, money and privilege should not override the essence of the monomyth, i.e. the quest for greatness.

In McGregor's post-fight speech at UFC 189 after he defeated Chad Mendes for the interim UFC Featherweight title, he said: 'I honestly believe there is no such thing as self-made. I believe that is a term that does not exist. For me it certainly doesn't. The people who have been around for my whole career have helped shape this moment. This night and this moment is for them'. Campbell talked about the hero with a thousand faces. The monomyth might be a familiar archetypal pattern and we culturally might be overly familiar with the cultural clichés of hero stories [Lule 2002]. But heroes take on endless forms and they need to be believable. They are often pitched as products of a greater struggle beyond their own personal gain and worth – we see this in the complexities of McGregor's persona within and beyond this analysis. In this case after the Mendes fight we saw McGregor as a humble hero who, on the one hand, always strives for further greatness, but through a sense of gratitude. In June 2015, before he had either of his world titles, he tweeted: 'Be grateful with everything you have and you will be successful in everything you do'.

But McGregor is not always predictable. We never quite know what to expect, especially during pre-fight theatrics. This unpredictability combined with the mystical qualities that the law of attraction myth brings to McGregor's persona relate to another archetypal convention. McGregor has referred to himself as 'Mystic Mac' when he has predicted outcomes of fights with audacious precision. The divided opinion over McGregor and the mysticism he constructs through his journey can be understood through some attention to the trickster archetype.

11 One user comment on YouTube, in response to this interview, said: 'I appreciate it when rich people address the fact that yes they're rich, but they still want to maintain a mindset of hard work and not letting the wealth get to their head. I'm so happy he touched on the fact that he doesn't want his son to feel privileged and he still wants him to have motivations and a mindset of working hard in life.'

## MYSTIC MAC: NOTORIOUS TRICKSTER TRANSCENDS UFC

As discussed earlier, tricksters play around with established orders. They do the unexpected. They challenge perceptions and expectations in ways that simultaneously stimulate excitement, shock, awe and even resentment. They can be genius, they can be foolish. They are somewhat paradoxical. There are many ways in which we can discuss trickster traits in relation to McGregor. Even when tricksters 'fail' they have the ability to make a point or interrupt systems or beliefs and perceptions that previously went unchallenged. They find a way of grinning back at us when we laugh at them [Radin 1956; Kelsey 2014, 2017]. The trickster archetype is among the most complex of all archetypal traits since, as Williams [2012] argues, it is the product of our contradictory trickster brains – it is a neurological mechanistic pattern that has evolved in human consciousness. We can see these qualities in McGregor and the spectacle that unfolds around him.

McGregor often speaks of visualising what he will do and predicts it out loud. In a 14-minute video compilation called, 'How I used the law of attraction to visualize my success into reality', we see numerous examples of McGregor talking about visualisation [<https://youtu.be/e3jwYznqv0>]. After the Aldo fight McGregor said in the press conference: 'I said his right hand would get him into trouble. It's the shot I predicted. I said he'd overload on his right hand, I said I'd slip, I said I'd bang the left hook and that's what happened'. In response, a journalist asked, 'How do you do that? How do you predict these things?'. Pointing at his head and holding his hand on his heart he said:

**If you can see it here and you have the courage enough to speak it, it will happen. I see these shots, I see these sequences, and I don't shy away from them. A lot of times people believe in certain things but they keep it to themselves, they don't put it out there. If you truly believe in it and you become vocal with it, you are creating that law of attraction and it will become reality.**

In another interview the same evening, Helwani acknowledged this prediction in diachronic relation to the monomythical pattern discussed earlier: 'Conor, in February of 2013 we spoke for the first time. You didn't have a car, you didn't have a pot to piss in, all you had were blueberries. Now here you are with the undisputed gold. Enjoy it my friend. You deserve it, you called it'. McGregor responds: 'Yeah, from nothing to something to everything'. In the 2013 interview that Helwani refers to here McGregor had said: 'I am an Irish legend, I am a living legend, I see myself as the champ already. ... I see myself as the champ from day one. Before I even started training I always saw myself as the champ. That's how I see myself, I visualised myself already there. I visualise everything'.

Once McGregor defeated Alvarez, he had duplicated his Cage Warriors success and concurrently held titles in two different weight classes. And he had predicted he would do this and he made a point of the fact that people laughed at him for saying it. In another Helwani interview, he said:

**I've done everything I said I was going to do. I was laughed at, I was literally laughed at ... When I first came in [and said] I was going to win these two world titles, I was laughed at. That's never going to happen ... I said I was going to win the two world titles and I won them. I've done everything I said I was going to do. Every move is a calculated step.**

Of course, predictions and self-belief are common in combat sports. But McGregor has made a point of making numerous accurate predictions in ways that resonate through his story and persona. The Irish theme in the quote above is significant since it contextualises McGregor's journey within a form of national narration through which the Irish are the previously oppressed, fighting against the odds. There are distinct trickster-hero traits at work here: to be laughed at and doubted because of your own audacity, only to go and defy expectations and disprove your doubters.

Even on those occasions, like the Mayweather fight, when it does not work out for McGregor, he has still been able to capitalise on any perceived 'failure' to his own benefit. He has pointed to the fact that he is the one breaking boundaries as a UFC fighter – managing the situation to invoke his superiority over his peers in the UFC. Despite the outcome, his story is often told in a way that pitches setbacks as trials and tribulations on a greater journey. Either way, for many audiences, the Mayweather fight was audacious. The ability to make it happen carried distinct trickster-hero qualities. This effects the way that the spectacle is played out – it shapes the perceptions and responses of audiences, critics and pundits. To be a McGregor fan or critic in this respect is beside the point. The story resonates with many fans and it riles many critics. Hence, McGregor reflects significant cultural and psychological traits of trickster mythology. There are powerful affective qualities to this persona and McGregor's defiance.

In terms of financial gain, McGregor has made no secret of the fact that the Mayweather fight has made him very rich because it was a contest and spectacle that so many people wanted to see. In a tweet after the Mayweather fight he posted a picture of himself before the walk-out, pulling an animalistic pose, commenting: 'The captured Orang-utan who obeyed the rules of a Circus and got filthy rich from it'. McGregor got rich as much from those who wanted to see him lose as his own fans who wanted to see him win. This tweet was another case of McGregor

embracing the chaos, as the trickster does, and using it to his advantage. It is a reminder to his critics that they might hate him but they still make him money. As we often see with trickster figures, when we laugh at them, they grin back.

These traits also appeared after the Nate Diaz saga. After McGregor's first UFC defeat against Diaz, he faced an inevitable onslaught – many critics of McGregor had waited for this moment. McGregor expressed his feelings after the fight in the following manner: 'This is the game. We win some we lose some. I will never shy away from defeat. ... This is part of the game. ... I took the fight, it didn't pay off, this is the fight business, it's another day, I'll come back'. In an interview with Chris Eubank, Helwani described this moment as McGregor's finest hour because of the way that he accepted the defeat with dignity. In agreement, Eubank said McGregor behaved like a champion: 'The fact that he lost like a gentleman tells you something about his code: he has honour' [<https://youtu.be/HerZ-jO-Cv0>].

McGregor won the rematch and took the opportunity to prove a point, leaving the arena on crutches, shouting: 'You all doubted me! Doubt me now!' In his post-fight press conference, he made a point of saying that the money and standards of the UFC have increased because of him, yet people still celebrated his demise after defeat and it lit a fire in his belly. When asked why this rematch and victory meant so much to him, considering it was not a world title fight and he still had a world title, McGregor responded:

This was one hell of an important fight for me. Everyone from the media to the fighters wrote me off this one. ... They tried to say if I lose this one I'm done. They tried to discredit the fact I am going up in weight – he was 25-30lb heavier, I don't care what anyone says, he was a big boy in there. ... But I learned from the last fight ... The whole lot of it brought out the best in me. ... It was a war. I'm glad it went that way. I got to show my heart in there.

The trickster puts everything on display for all to see. Within the persona and narrative that McGregor constructed, he has personified success and greatness for his believers whilst refusing to give any ground to his critics after defeat. Even for his critics he plays a paradoxical role – he is the giver and negator, the creator and destroyer [Radin 1956; Kelsey 2017].

In an exchange with Rafael dos Anjos, McGregor once said: 'I can make you rich, I can change your bum life. When you sign to fight me it's a celebration. You ring back home, you ring your wife, 'Baby we done it, we're rich, Baby, Conor McGregor made us rich, break out the red panties' [[https://youtu.be/BV57\\_OEDU1s](https://youtu.be/BV57_OEDU1s)]. This is another

example of the tension I mentioned earlier between the contradictory characteristics of McGregor's persona that switches between spaces and environments. As Kavanagh [2016] and McGregor have both alluded to, there are calculated strategies to pre-fight exchanges in the 'psychological warfare' that is part of the process of winning a fight.<sup>12</sup> In this instance, rather than the humble hero, a paradoxical trickster-hero occurs. The UFC and other fighters benefit from McGregor's profile, commercial success and contribution to the sport, but many of them resent his presence, bravado and persona. The oscillation between humility and provocative bravado is something McGregor has acknowledged himself. For example, in January 2017 McGregor held a live interview event with an audience of 5,000 fans. Dressed in a suit on stage with a custom-built Rolls Royce, McGregor showed his appreciation for the support he has received: 'I'm so grateful for every single one of you. ... I truly mean that. ... I know I'm a cocky motherfucker, and I know you love me for it, but I am truly humbled and truly grateful for every single person in this room' [<https://youtu.be/zmpS09DgWrM>].

During this event McGregor made further comments about his continually advancing journey transcending the UFC in other commercial ventures, which were again played out through visualisation:

It's only January of 2017, I am already the face of the UFC, I am already the face of boxing, I am already the face of the WWE, and I am already the face of Hollywood. ... In the media I stated many times ... it was a dream to climb up that cage and raise those two belts. That was in every interview I ever done. ... That Dennis Siver situation when I grabbed the two belts was before I even got one belt ... that's how strong the power of visualisation is. I wasn't even a UFC world champion at that time, and already I was grabbing two of them, and flaunting it in everybody's face. I believed it was going to happen, I put the work in for it to happen, and it happened. It's a strong thing, the power of visualisation, that motherfucker's been a part of my shit since I was 16.

Not only was this before the Mayweather fight had been announced, but it relates to a developing rumour about the WWE. Within 10 months of this interview talks between McGregor and the WWE were reportedly happening. This is another case of McGregor doing what he

12 As BJ Penn (one of the only other UFC fighters to ever hold championship belts in two different weight classes) has put it: 'McGregor has been able to carefully find weak spots in his opponents' mental psyche[s], which he then uses to get them emotionally invested in the fight, making them more likely to be overly aggressive and reckless come fight-night' [Penn quoted in Bell 2016].

had previously done before he had won a world title, telling a story in which he has already achieved future goals that he has visualised. The Hollywood rumours of McGregor landing a major film contract are ongoing, with McGregor apparently being approached by Hollywood stars proposing potential projects. His recent documentary, *Conor McGregor: Notorious*, has also become the highest grossing Irish-made documentary of all time at the Irish box office.

The point about the WWE is significant since the spectacle and semiotics of wrestling that Barthes talked about operate through the persona of McGregor, whose theatrics reportedly draw on elements seen in WWE. A source in *The Sun* said: 'Conor is a huge wrestling fan. His entire persona on stage he has developed from watching performers like Ric Flair and The Rock. These are the top dogs at self-promotion and trash talk. He watched these guys when he was younger. This is something he's always wanted to do' (Higgins 2017). In addition, Stephanie McMahon, WWE chief brand officer, also said: 'I think Conor would be a perfect fit for WWE. He certainly has the personality, the athletic ability, the appeal. He speaks his mind, he is very genuine and authentic and he has a hell of a Vince McMahon swagger'. The latter is a reference to the 'Billion Dollar Strut' that McMahon does in WWE, which McGregor has replicated both inside and outside of the Octagon. Despite the UFC's differences to WWE in a sporting sense, it still features a familiar cultural spectacle to engage its audiences. We often hear fighters in the UFC paying respect to opponents after fights, acknowledging that they only traded insults in order to get a fight contract or increase the commercial appeal of a fight.

The way in which McGregor attends press conferences has become a feature in itself. He is often late and turns up dressed in spectacular style, distinguishing himself from the other fighters around him. The Aldo and Alvarez conferences were distinct examples of this. On both occasions officials had to step in to break up a fight on stage after McGregor took the championship belts from his opponents to suggest he was already champion – reinforcing the vision he previously symbolised when lifting two belts before fighting Dennis Siver. Pre-fight press conferences become another space in which the performance and spectacle of the trickster continue to shock and defy established orders.

The verbal exchanges and mind games before fights might be a common feature of UFC press conferences, but taking belts from opponents before a fight breaks even the boundaries, conventions and expectations of press conference volatility. The audacity both excites the crowd and riles opponents. When McGregor won the second belt against Alvarez he played again with audience expectations, as it initially sounded like a humble victory speech was playing out: 'I've spent a lot

of time slating everybody in the company. Backstage I'm starting fights over everybody. I've ridiculed everyone on the roster, I just want to say from the bottom of my heart, I'd like to take this chance to apologise, to absolutely nobody! The double champ does what the fuck he wants' [<https://youtu.be/0Szj21arytU>].

McGregor's theatrics and popularity have arguably overwhelmed some of the most experienced fighters he has faced. Kavanagh [2016] recalls the build up to the Diego Brandao fight and the divisive persona McGregor had already brought to the UFC: 'The people who admired him got behind him fervently. Those on the opposite side of the fence couldn't stand the sight or sound of him ... Brandao was receiving social media messages asking him to 'Put some manners on McGregor' and 'Shut that Irish guy up' ...'. But Kavanagh explains how the pressure and provocation got to Brandao psychologically. He recalls Brandao saying: 'When we have the rematch in Brazil we'll see how much of a tough guy you are then'. This comment was a sign to McGregor and Kavanagh that Brandao was already defeated in his mind-set. McGregor had noticed Brandao's emotional state and Kavanagh [2016] recalls him saying: 'He's emotionally invested in this contest already. This isn't going to end well for him'.

In contrast, McGregor has spoken of the calmness and freedom he feels when it's time to fight: 'When I make that walk, I am unshackling chains off me. I simply [get in there] and do it as I feel. The closer the fight comes there is no face, my face becomes blank. Back on the world tour I acted in that moment. But now war is on us and I am calm, cold, ruthless'. The *Irish Independent* described the contrasting manic and mellow manners of McGregor and quoted him describing the zen that he feels when he trains in Dublin:

**'I am in a state of zen right now', he said, the manic replaced by the mellow. 'My mind is calm, composed. I am prepared and happy. This must be close to 15 press conferences that I have done without fighting this man. I'm ready. Training at home does something to me. I am here in a moment of zen and I am ready for the fight of my life'.**

These descriptions of calmness are interesting. Even if one does not believe them to be true accounts of McGregor's emotional and psychological state before a fight, they are part of the persona he constructs. The calmness is a stark contrast to the chaos of press conferences and weigh-ins. This contrast is an interesting characteristic since it reflects trickster tensions [Kelsey 2017] in the Apollonian and Dionysian qualities that simultaneously operate through trickster stories and figures. On the one hand, Dionysus would embrace the chaos in order to mix up the established order of things; on the other hand, there



is an Apollonian order and sense of clarity and calm in the agenda and agency that the trickster pursues. These qualities reflect the trickster's ability to bring chaos to a situation and interrupt order in a way that provides him with an advantage. The connection that McGregor makes with Dublin when he says 'training at home does something to me' points towards the affective atmosphere and connections to Ireland that play a significant role in the mythology of both McGregor and the national narration of Ireland.

## THE FIGHTING IRISH ARE THERE SPIRITS AT WORK?

The trickster-hero who disproves his doubters operates intertextually through the Irish underdog theme of McGregor's story. The idea of being laughed at and doubted because he is Irish is something that McGregor has made a point about in interviews:

I've been listening to them laugh my whole career. ... An Irish man win [an MMA] world title? Hell no. An Irish man? An Irish man win a fight in the UFC? Hell no. Laughs, laughs all round. OK, he got a win, but now he wants to win a world title? Hell no. He's all talk, he's all hype, he's a joke. Laughter all round at the joker. Then the joker goes and wins the world title. Then he wants to win a second world title. More laughter. ... The sound of laughter and the sound of doubt motivates me ... I'm enjoying that.

[<https://youtu.be/teVJMJBoWkk>]

This account consciously entertains the underdog dynamic of the monomyth and the journey that unfolds as the trickster continually breaks through to defy expectations. There is no reason to suggest this is not how McGregor genuinely feels. But even if it is only a mask to construct a particular persona, it is still significant that this is the story he chooses to tell. This story contributes significantly to the image of greatness that resonates with fans and audiences.

McGregor's fights and press conferences have always been attended by large Irish crowds who create a distinct atmosphere. A quote that can often be seen on Irish flags and McGregor memorabilia, says: 'We're not just here to take part. We're here to take over'. Joe Rogan describes the immensity of McGregor's following:

This guy has thousands and thousands of people fly from Ireland to Vegas every time he fights. The weigh-ins, it seems like you're in Dublin. It's fucking crazy, man. When

I interview him at the weigh-ins at the UFC in Vegas, you look out and you see nothing but Irish flags. You see people screaming and cheering and singing. Mandalay Bay during the Floyd Mayweather fight, which was not even the venue where the fight was being held, was packed bumper to bumper with Irishmen, walking down the hallway cheering and singing songs in sync.

[<https://youtu.be/PP9ogcnM8BA>]

This reflects the affective qualities I previously discussed [Kelsey 2017] in relation to football crowds being in sync and sharing the same passion for the same moment, acting in unison. People connect through a shared perception of the figure, the moment, the team, or the cause they are following. In this instance, McGregor has struck a chord with the Irish people as a symbol of national pride. I previously used murmurations [Kelsey 2017: 168-172] as a metaphor to describe how culture and ideology operate through groups who share similar perceptions and feelings through particular stories that resonate with them. In this instance, McGregor's journey is metaphorically compatible with the national narration of Ireland. Instances like this result in synchronised behaviours, feelings, movements and beliefs – not for everyone, of course, but for large and significant groups of a given society or societies. McGregor's status, success and story for many Irish people has become a proud building block of national narration.

In January 2016, the Oireachtas committee in Ireland considered a petition that had been submitted requesting McGregor's face to be put on the €1 coin. The *Irish Times* reported that whilst the request had been rejected the committee were positive about the petition, with one member describing McGregor as a phenomenon and also stating: 'There's huge public interest in the suggestion because there's a slightly more serious issue at stake, which is, how do we and should we pay tribute or commemorate or honour people in this country who have excelled'. McGregor tweeted about the petition, saying: 'It would be a true honour for me to be immortalised on the €1 coin! Thank you to my fans for the petition! Let's go Oireachtas! Vote YES'. He then tweeted a photo of the coin with his face on it and said: 'The boom is BACK baby!!! #FuckTheRecession'.

McGregor's trickster qualities reflect someone conquering an economic system that was previously impenetrable to him and remains elusive to others from his background. Despite McGregor's enormous personal wealth, his story, his persona and the essence of his journey are culturally and ideologically significant because they support the feeling that he is still grounded and in touch with his past. For example, in the interview before the Mayweather fight, Helwani asked McGregor about the people of Ireland – whether his grounded personality and attitude explains why he has such a strong following back home – especially



Figure 2: Tweet from @TheNotoriousMMA, 3.05am 13 January 2016

during a time of recession:

Helwani: Do you believe that is why you have the fan base you have, because you were able to come out ... during a time of recession in Ireland and you have the people of Ireland [that you are inspiring to] break through, you can be successful, you can achieve the wildest dreams. Do you believe that's why they have that connection to you?

McGregor: I believe it's a strong part in it. If it gives inspiration to young kids and young people or anyone in any walk of life to go and achieve things that are deemed unthinkable and impossible, that's such a great thing I am so proud of. I am just grateful I have the support of my nation and the people around the world.

Hope and inspiration are recurring themes in McGregor's story. The

humble hero, who was bullied as child, did not come from a privileged background but nevertheless achieved greatness. Dialogical mechanisms stimulate those intertextual connections that large audiences make between themselves, their imagined communities, and a shared iconic figure to whom they feel they can relate.

As the examples above show, McGregor's persona and Irish identity are not just based around the love that Irish fans have for him, but also the love he continually expresses for Ireland. He is regularly seen with the Irish flag in the Octagon or in pre-fight events. The Irish fans participate in the Barthesian spectacle that we often see before fights. For example, before the Aldo fight, UFC President Dana White (who was dressed in an Ireland football shirt) opened the press conference up to the audience in Ireland [<https://youtu.be/1HsRyaV7GDI>]. McGregor entered to cheers and a chorus of Irish fans singing. He threw his Ireland football shirt into the crowd as a sea of camera phones and Irish flags faced him on the stage. Aldo entered, carrying his belt over one shoulder and a hand tapping his chest to a chorus of boos and cheers of 'Who are ya? Who are ya?' and 'Conor's gonna get ya'. The fighters performed moral roles for their respective audiences. The Dublin audience revelled in the spectacle as Aldo answered the first question with deliberate provocation, playing into his role as villain: 'I came here, I am the King of Dublin'. McGregor responded with his feet up on the table, pointing at himself: 'You're looking at the King of Dublin'. It was at this moment when McGregor leapt up, reached across and took Aldo's belt. The crowd celebrated as McGregor lifted the belt in the air – in the moment of the spectacle, for the Dublin audience, a moral victory ensued for the audacious hero, as McGregor responded to Aldo's taunts and a frustrated Aldo demanded his belt back.

Kavanagh [2016] says that there is always a method to McGregor's madness at the press conferences and weigh-ins – he knows exactly what he is doing. His rhetoric, persona and broader semiosis always rally the Irish crowd. In the Alvarez pre-fight press conference, McGregor turned up late wearing a long white mink coat, bright red roll-neck t-shirt and chequered red trousers, dancing across the stage to take Alvarez's belt and put it next to his. After shouting, 'Sorry I'm late, I just don't give a fuck!', McGregor was asked what he thought about Alvarez saying he was disappointed in the country of Ireland. He said: 'I don't give a fuck what Eddie says. Who gives a fuck? The Irish are back. We've taken back control of New York City. I run New York City. I'm a fucking pimp, rocking Gucci mink! Without me, this whole fucking ship sinks!' This speaks to the mythology around the Irish in New York and the mid-19th century when they made up a quarter of the City's population. It is another story about the Irish struggle – when millions fought against the odds for survival, leaving Ireland for America during the potato famine.

Irish mythology and the myth of the Fighting Irish does not resonate only with the people of Ireland. Before the Mayweather fight, Chris Eubank provided interviews on his views and predictions for the fight. He felt McGregor stood a chance because of the 'Irish spirit'. In one interview his description of the Irish spirit reflected post-colonial connotations of struggle and in-built qualities of survival that transcend the individual through the transpersonal spirit of a nation:

Everyone is forgetting that he is an Irishman and an Irishman has a spirit ... The Maori, the Maroons, we can liken them to the Jamaicans. They are a special people ... I'm not talking about Conor McGregor, I'm not talking about an MMA fighter, I'm talking about an Irishman. An Irishman is always to be respected. And that is where it is ... possible that Mayweather Jr has taken his eye off the target. What is he fighting? [He's] not fighting an MMA fighter. [He's] not fighting a guy who is ... limited in professional boxing. [He's] fighting an Irishman. ... He's an Irishman, so this fight is a very interesting fight. Not because of ability but because of spirit.  
[<https://youtu.be/a2n0jZE0q9E>]

Eubank draws on his experience against Steve Collins, who beat him twice, when he talks about the Irish. In another interview with Helwani, he compared himself and Collins with Mayweather and McGregor respectively: 'There was no way this guy had a chance of beating me. He just didn't have the talent, the ability, the skill, the punching power. But because of that ghost-like spirit, he was able to do the impossible. Ireland rejoiced for months'. As Eubank continues, he refers again to the spirit of the Irish through a metaphor depicting a supernatural dynamic of consciousness that this spirit operates through: 'In war-like situations they do have spirits, which are able to enter a different paradigm. He may be able to bring this paradigm into this particular fight'.

These comments about the Irish spirit might be as much about Eubank managing his own ego and persona through an honourable story – he proceeds to explain how he accepted defeat like a champion and the defeat was a triumph for him because of the dignity he showed. For Eubank, there is an affective function to the metaphor. For many Irish fans who find themselves 'in sync' before fights or celebrating victory, the metaphor resonates and the national narration continues through those affective qualities. It is significant how Irish mythology plays out in this manner – it fits a coherent narrative of struggle and resistance against the odds. This is a recurring trait in the 'greatness' that has been constructed around McGregor.

In a clip titled 'Joe Rogan & Russell Brand Discuss Conor McGregor's

Greatness', Brand proposes his understanding of McGregor's mythology. I quote Brand at length here since his comments reflect some of the theoretical and analytical principles that have been applied throughout this case study:

Their myth aligns with his myth. The myth of the Irish people being oppressed by British colonialism and having to fight for their freedom. It resonates with what this man represents. And perhaps this is always what happens with figures of greatness within the realm of sport ... or politics; temporarily a person captures a particular mood, a particular energy. And this is what again I think is to do with unconsciousness. I don't think people are ... aware of these kinds of feelings. It's stimulated on a level that's not about thought. This is one of the things I'm very interested in: what lies beyond the rational? ... There seems to be some ingredient, even in Conor McGregor, that you can't quite pin down. Yes, there's the greatness as a boxer, yes the Irish people, but there's also some flavour that is being caught. I wonder if you can ever pre-empt or understand these things. I wonder if you can ever drill down. But the work of Joseph Campbell, the work of Carl Jung, ... these people who say there are unconscious archetypes, there are unconscious themes, there are stories that are running below the surface – patterns [and] co-ordinates that can be connected to.

Brand's commentary points to the relevance and significance of affective mythology as an analytical position containing those theoretical approaches of scholars such as Campbell and Jung. As my previous analysis [Kelsey 2017] of Brand showed, some of his curiosities around the unconscious, God and the work of Jung move towards a more dualist philosophy of mind and consciousness. Nonetheless, Brand's comments here at least apply to my argument that the semiotic, in its broadest communicative sense, can be understood through psycho-discursive analysis that oscillates between representation and non-representational forms. The cultural and transpersonal semiosis that operates around national narration, identity and, more specifically, Irish mythology resonates here in the case of McGregor through those complex dynamics of affective apparatus. Affective apparatus helps us construct, understand, feel and experience the myths that we are part of.

## CONCLUSION

### UNDERSTANDING MCGREGOR'S GREATNESS

I have conducted this analysis as a McGregor fan. Of course, critics of McGregor would provide a different take on this case study. However, the archetypal traits are distinct. My analysis was not about the wrongness or rightness of any given myth. It is not that one reading is positive and one is negative either. Mythologies stir different emotions within different audiences – or, to take this nuance further, they stir different feelings amongst the same audiences at different moments of time under different cultural circumstances. As Brand's closing point alluded to, there is a current moment in which McGregor has captured a mood and provided a resonant story.<sup>13</sup> But there is also something beyond those factors that is difficult to define. That is because semiosis, psychology and culture simultaneously operate within the 'illusionary' [Dennett 2012] wonderments of consciousness that are currently beyond even our scientific knowledge of brain, body and mind. But that does not make them unknowable. As the likes of Dennett would say, science and its ontological questions around mind and consciousness do not pursue the unknowable, they are just working on it. Following Brand's point, perhaps the desire to 'drill down' further is where future work between cultural studies, philosophy, neuroscience and other biological sciences can work together.

This case study has broken down some of the mythological characteristics of Conor McGregor. Attention to these qualities has helped to understand the essence of the story around McGregor's journey through the cultural and psycho-discursive mechanisms of storytelling. Through his persona, we have seen how McGregor's commercial value and profile have transcended the UFC – continually breaking boundaries and expectations. These powerful traits have helped us to understand McGregor's aura of 'greatness' and especially how this resonates in Ireland. In doing so, I have paid some attention to the role of visualisation and the myth of the law of attraction. A non-reductive materialist approach to consciousness understands how this myth functions *metaphorically*, as both a semiotic and psychological (internal/emodied) mechanism, as opposed to that of any external force, power or entity. This enabled me to critique dualist notions of visualisation and the law of attraction, which literalise those metaphors as mystical truths about the universe and human consciousness. This was not to undermine McGregor's use of visualisation but rather to understand it as a plausible affective mechanism in its metaphorical form.

Whilst many audiences will take issue with McGregor's materialistic attitude towards money, fame and glamour, we have also seen complexities in his character as he acknowledges the importance of gratitude and generosity. I have been more interested in the emotive and affective nuances of McGregor's persona rather than fixating on one aspect – such as money and wealth – from one ideological perspective. As we have seen, McGregor is not exclusively a case of ruthless, narcissistic, money driven materialism that lacks any grace, as his critics might suggest. Many of McGregor's social appearances could be interpreted in this way; however, we have also seen examples where this public performance is contradicted by personal insights and moral values that tell a different story through a humbler narrative. Through the monomythical qualities and paradoxical tensions of the trickster-hero, this analysis has shown that the essence of McGregor's story (his journey) runs deeper than the materialistic flamboyance and provocations that audiences often see.

Mythology is not limited to representation. Mythology is part of who and what we are as humans. The study of martial arts involves the study of cultural, social, political, economic, commercial, psychological, biological and transpersonal phenomena. The UFC provides a spectacle through which the intensity of MMA is fused with popular culture, which is simultaneously stimulated by and through MMA. Through the characters, personas and spectacles of the UFC, moments and spaces open up for pre-existing cultural mythologies to be recontextualised through the fighters, fans and commentators of the sport. The intensity and genuineness of its competition escalates the emotive and affective qualities of those mythologies as they are played out through the semiosis of the UFC. Building on legacies of other charismatic fighters and orators from the past such as Muhammed Ali and Bruce Lee, Conor McGregor has carved another narrative path in martial arts and cultural mythology. His legacy will inevitably influence the style and evolution of future fighters and figures within martial arts and popular culture.

<sup>13</sup> Much like my analysis of Nigel Farage [2017], the archetypal essence of his story is distinct regardless of the affect it has, which is dependent on ideology.



## REFERENCES

- Barthes, Roland. 1993. *Mythologies*. London: Vintage.
- Bell, Evan. 2016. 'Conor McGregor on Psychological Warfare', BJPenn.com. Available at: <http://www.bjpenn.com/mma-news/conor-mcgregor/conor-mcgregor-psychological-warfare-ruthless-business-ruthless/>.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. 1962. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Vintage.
- Bottici, Chiara. 2007. *A Philosophy of Political Myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowman, Paul. 2017. *Mythologies of Martial Arts*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Byrne, Rhonda. 2006. *The Secret*. New York: Atria Books.
- Campbell, Joseph. 1949. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. California: New World Library.
- Campbell, Joseph. 2008. *Pathways to Bliss*. California: New World Library.
- Campbell, Joseph and Bill Moyers. 1988. *The Power of Myth*. New York: Doubleday.
- Carlyle, Thomas. 1908. *Sartor Resartus: On Heroes and Hero Worship*. New York: Dutton.
- Doty, William G. (2000) *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*. London: Alabama.
- Dennett, Daniel. 1991. *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Dennett, Daniel. 2017. *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*. London: Penguin.
- Flood, Christopher. 2002. *Political Myth*. New York: Routledge.
- Frentz, Thomas S. 2008. *Trickster in Tweed: The Quest for Quality in a Faculty Life*. California: Left Coast Press.
- Fuchs, Christian. 2015. 'Critical Theory'. *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*. Edited by Gianpietro Mazzoleni. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- Harari, Yuval N. 2014a. 'Power and Imagination'. Available at: <http://www.ynharari.com/topic/power-and-imagination/>.
- Harari, Yuval N. 2014b. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. London: Vintage.
- Haule, John R. 2010. *Jung in the 21st Century Volume One: Evolution and Archetype*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Higgins, Adam. 2017. 'Conor McGregor in Shock Talks to Make Wrestling Bebut with WWE at Next Year's Wrestlemania Extravaganza'. *The Sun*. Available at: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/4650041/conor-mcgregor-wwe-wrestlemania/>.
- Hyde, Lewis. 1998. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Hynes, William J. and William G. Doty (eds.). 1993. *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- The Irish Times*. 'Petition to Put Conor McGregor on €1 Coin Rejected'. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/petition-to-put-conor-mcgregor-on-1-coin-rejected-1.2495443>.
- Jacoby, Mario. 1984. *The Analytic Encounter: Transference and Human Relationship*. Toronto: Inner City Books.
- Jung, Carl. 1946. 'The Fight with the Shadow'. *The Listener* 36, 641.
- Jung, Carl. 1959. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Jung, Carl. 1970. *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice*. London: Vintage.
- Jung, Carl. 1973. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Pantheon.
- Jung, Carl. 1992. *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Jung, Carl. 2001. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. London: Routledge.
- Kavanagh, John. 2016. *Win or Learn: MMA, Conor McGregor and Me – A Coach's Journey*. London: Penguin.

Kelsey, Darren. 2014. 'The Myth of the City Trickster: Storytelling, Bankers and Ideology in the Mail Online'. *Political Ideologies* 19.3, 307-330.

[doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.951147](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.951147)

Kelsey, Darren. 2015. *Media, Myth and Terrorism: A Discourse-Mythological Analysis of the 'Blitz Spirit' in British Newspaper Responses to the July 7th Bombings*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kelsey, Darren. 2017. *Media and Affective Mythologies: Discourse, Archetypes and Ideology in Contemporary Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lule, Jack. 2001. *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*. New York: Guilford Press.

Mitrosilis, Teddy. 2016. 'LeBron James Uses This Obsessive Conor McGregor Quote for Inspiration'. *FoxSports.com*. Available at: <https://www.foxsports.com/ufc/story/lebron-james-conor-mcgregor-cleveland-cavaliers-obsessed-strive-for-greatness-012016>.

Oatley, Keith, Dacher Keltner, and Jennifer M. Jenkins. 2006. *Understanding Emotions*. Second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Donnell, Marcus. 2003. 'Preposterous Trickster: Myth, News, the Law and John Marsden'. *Media Arts Law Review* 8.4.

Radin, Paul. 1956. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. New York: Schocken.

Rose, Steven P.R. 1997. *Lifelines: Biology Beyond Determinism*. Oxford: Oxford University.

Rose, Stephen P.R. 2005. *The 21st Century Brain: Explaining, Mending and Manipulating the Mind*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Street, Brian V. 1972. 'The Trickster Theme: Winnebago and Azande'. *Zande Themes*. Edited by Andre Singer and Brian V. Street. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 82-104.

Stevens, Anthony. 1994. *Jung: A Very Short Introduction*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stevens, Anthony. 2016. *Living Archetypes: The Selected Works of Anthony Stevens*. London: Routledge.

Wetherell, Margaret. 2012. *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage.

Williams, David. 2012. *The Trickster Brain: Neuroscience, Evolution, and Narrative*. Plymouth: Lexington.

Zweig, Connie and Jeremiah Abrams (eds.). 1991. *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*. New York: Penguin.

## ABOUT THE JOURNAL

**Martial Arts Studies** is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



Cardiff University Press  
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

**Martial Arts Studies** is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.  
[cardiffuniversitypress.org](http://cardiffuniversitypress.org)

### Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

### Issue DOI

10.18573/mas.i5

*Accepted for publication 24 January 2018*

**Martial Arts Studies**  
Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

MARTIALARTSSTUDIES.ORG

TWITTER.COM/MASTUDIES

# MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

## EDITORS

Paul Bowman  
Benjamin N. Judkins

## EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

Kyle Barrowman  
Qays Stetkevych

To discuss publication or to submit  
a paper please contact:  
[martial.arts.studies@gmail.com](mailto:martial.arts.studies@gmail.com)

## EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch *University of York*  
Stephen Chan *SOAS*  
Greg Downey *Macquarie University*  
D.S. Farrer *University of Guam*  
Adam Frank *University of Central Arkansas*  
Thomas A. Green *Texas A&M University*  
T. J. Hinrichs *Cornell University*  
Leon Hunt *Brunel University London*  
Felipe P. Jocano Jr *University of the Philippines*  
Gina Marchetti *Hong Kong University*  
Meaghan Morris *The University of Sydney*  
Daniel Mroz *University of Ottawa*  
Meir Shahar *Tel Aviv University*  
Dale Spencer *Carleton University*  
Douglas Wile *Alverno College*  
Phillip Zarrilli *Exeter University, Emeritus*